

Consensus

Volume 7 | Issue 3

Article 2

7-1-1981

Unitas and concordia in the confessions: significance for fellowship among Lutheran churches

Roger W. Nostbakken

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>

Recommended Citation

Nostbakken, Roger W. (1981) "Unitas and concordia in the confessions: significance for fellowship among Lutheran churches,"
Consensus: Vol. 7 : Iss. 3 , Article 2.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol7/iss3/2>

This Articles is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

"How long will it be ere ye make an end of words? . . ."

Job 18:12

UNITAS AND CONCORDIA

IN THE CONFESSIONS

Significance for fellowship among Lutheran Churches

Roger W. Nostbakken

Those of us who have been involved for many years in the negotiations towards fellowship and merger feel that enough has already been written on the subject. *Toward Union* details the merger negotiations for the period 1972-1978. The document *Affirmation and Appeal* represents the very substantial consensus achieved already by 1970 among Lutherans in Canada.

Having considered the large body of material which has been presented over the years, and considering further the fact that neither full fellowship or merger has yet been achieved, it seemed that another set of largely academic papers was unlikely to be very useful. After all, we all know the history of the Confessions; we all know the circumstances under which they came into being; we all subscribe to them in essentially the same way. A survey done in 1974 in connection with jurisdictional church conventions suggests that in fact the majority of Canadian Lutherans do not see unsurmountable or even serious differences among the three major Lutheran bodies. It does not matter whether one is referring to attitudes to union, doctrinal differences or differences of practice, the fact remains that the majority in all these jurisdictions feel those differences could be reconciled or simply allowed to exist in a united church.

The possibility of a united Lutheran church now seems remote. The probability of fellowship and partial merger are, however, surely goals toward which we must

commit ourselves and energetically work. In working towards those more limited goals than we had once set for ourselves, it seems important to try and take account of those factors which may loom larger than the doctrinal and confessional questions we have so long debated — matters of person and style; of cultural and national disposition; of regionalism within our churches; of various kinds of parochialism; of apprehension not having to do with any specific doctrinal or policy issue; of attitude toward unity and concord.

Aarne Siirala was touching on these matters when in 1979 he pointed out that "it is more important how one moves within one's system of reference, than how the system is structured". He said further, "Before there can be confessional unity there has to be shared experience of the authority in a covenantal fellowship . . . If there is no basic trust there is no unity."¹

The human, cultural, social and personal dimensions loom large in all negotiations. They can in fact be crucial. Luther in a half cheerful and half envious fashion gave recognition to this when he said of Melanchthon's writing of the C.A. ". . . I do not know what to improve or change in it; neither would it be proper, for I cannot tread so gently and quietly . . ." (L.W. vol. 54, p.45). In this statement lies a recognition of the importance of non-doctrinal matters in a serious quest for both unity and concord. Luther was wise enough to stand aside when he saw his own personal characteristics becoming a hindering factor.

The recognition and acceptance of the dynamics and influence of non-theological factors is something to which we have probably not given sufficient attention. Any reading of church history, however, reminds us of these factors. E. Clifford Nelson observes, ". . . two possible attitudes may develop in the heart and mind of the church historian. One may be an attitude of cold cynicism, resulting from a close scrutiny of much church activity done in the name of Christ, but which sometimes hardly comports with the spirit of Christ. The other is a growing wonder at the mercy and patience which God exercises towards his people . . . It cannot be gain-said that the witness of the Spirit has often been corroded and frustrated by the perversities and parochialism of God's people . . ."²

We have probably had enough of theological debate on the substance of the Confessions. What we have yet to do is to lift up for recognition the spirit and intention of the Confessions as that spirit and that intent are embodied in the concepts of *unitas* and *concordia*. The intention of the Confession was not to set down doctrinally correct formulas which would be intrinsically valuable. The intention was rather to so formulate doctrinal consensus as to *preserve* the *unity* of the whole church; to meet the needs of burdened consciences and to *restore concord* among fueling brothers and sisters in the faith. Historic discussion have focused more on content than intent. The focus here will be on the intention of the Confessions as

-
1. Aarne Siirala, "What Is the Protestant Principle and the Catholic Substance of Lutheran Identity?" unpublished paper presented at the Division of Theology, Lutheran Council in Canada, Concordia College, Edmonton, Alberta (May 28-29, 1979).
 2. E. Clifford Nelson *The Lutheran Church Among Norwegian Lutherans*, Vol. II (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1960), pp.vii-viii.

noted especially in the prefaces to the documents and then to reflect on the implications of those intentions for unity and fellowship.

THE INTENTION OF THE CONFESSIONS

There are, it seems to me, four main intentions common to the confessional documents:

1. *To make a confession of the essential content of the Christian Faith* as it derives from Scripture and as consistent with the tradition of the Church fathers. The preface to the Book of Concord refers to the Augsburg Confession (C.A.) specifically as a confession. Consistently the C.A. is given primacy and the other documents are regarded either as interpretations of or commentaries upon that confession. As confessors, however, the signatories of the various documents see themselves as affirming what is essential to the faith and not giving an exhaustive discussion of doctrines in particular. The intention clearly is not to be a dogmatics but to affirm that which is central for the church and which can be the normative center around which peace and harmony can again be established.

2. *To maintain unity and achieve concord.* A second major concern of the Confessions was the preservation of the unity of the church and the settling of inter-Lutheran discord. The preface to the Book of Concord piles up phrases indicating this concern, e.g., "godly men, lovers of peace and harmony, besides also learned theologians" (note, primacy is given to peace and harmony); "that book of godly concord"; ". . . the harmonious and concordant confession . . . of the ministers of our church and rectors of our schools"; "we have determined . . . to persevere constantly, with the greatest harmony . . ."; "we . . . desired to cultivate peace and harmony . . .".

The preface to the C.A. had previously expressed similar sentiments in its desire to bring matters "back to one simple truth and Christian concord". That preface also hoped "to confer amicably concerning all possible ways and means, in order that we may come together . . .". There was further the assurance that "we are in no wise holding back from anything that could bring about Christian concord . . .".

The preface to the Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord does not make such explicit affirmations. However, its consistent orientation to the C.A. puts it under the same general intention.

Such strong and repetitive calls for unity and concord cannot be seen only or even primarily as related to the historical context. They are rather expressions of the Confessor's perceptions of the fundamental unity the church has in Jesus Christ and the need for a concord which can be expressive of that unity. It is in fact the confessor's conviction that disunity and disharmony are not only contrary to the Gospel which is central for the church but are also antithetical to the church as a fellowship of God's people.

3. *To keep theological disputations to a minimum.* Both the style and content of the C.A. are a good example of the 16th century confessors' desire to keep theological disputes to a minimum in order to preserve the maximum of unity in the church. The preface speaks of a setting in which each party could weigh opinions in "mutual charity, leniency and kindness." The hope for "amicable" discussions, while

unrealized, was a further indication of good intentions. Even the Apology was, says Melancthon, "written with the greatest moderation possible."

The normative character of the C.A. with its brief, pithy and evangelical statements sets a mood and indicates an attitude for the Lutheran constituency. In this respect C.A. VII is definitive for the whole of both inter-Lutheran and ecumenical discussions. All that is essential is agreement on the right proclamation of the Gospel and the proper administration of the sacraments. Human traditions, rites and ceremonies are negotiable. The unity of the church is not negotiable and by implication should not be sabotaged by disagreement over non-essentials. The division of the C.A. into two sections is a further indication of the Confessor's desire to eliminate unnecessary theological debate or at least to indicate that discussions of certain matters of dispute should not disturb the essential unity of the church. The preface to the Book of Concord echoes this concern of the C.A. The Formula of Concord, it argues, was never intended to be a kind of blanket condemnation of all non-Lutheran churches. It was the intention, it is affirmed, to "censure and condemn only the fanatical opinions and their obstinate and blasphemous teachers . . ." Behind this lies the intention of the C.A. to reaffirm the unity of the church, a unity which can and must transcend petty argument.

The call for a "general, free, Christian Council . . ." is a further indication that the signatories to the C.A. saw the possibility of discussion within the context of the church as one body. This would be a council of the one true church in which council varying interpretations could be debated with the hope of gaining a general consensus.

4. *To serve the needs of ordinary people.* A fourth primary theme running through the confessions is a concern for the spiritual well being of ordinary people. Luther had a gift for writing and speaking in such a way that he communicated with the average person who was probably theologically illiterate. The confessional documents reflect a similar concern for persons whose consciences are burdened, whose minds are confused, whose personal need is to be satisfied and lifted up by the Gospel.

The Catechisms, as we are aware, were prepared because Luther was appalled at the low level of spiritual life and Christian knowledge. The Catechisms were in fact to serve as a major unifying and edifying influence historically within Lutheranism. The S.C. is without doubt *the confession* of the average Lutheran today. As such this document prepared by Luther for an educative purpose constitutes a major unifying force within Lutheranism.

The close association between serving the needs of ordinary people and acting as a unifying instrument is well illustrated in Luther's preface to his Smalcald Articles. He says, "I verily desire to see a truly Christian Council . . . in order that many persons may be helped. Not that we need it . . . But we see in the bishoprics everywhere so many parishes vacant and desolate that one's heart would break, and yet neither the bishops or canons care how the poor people live or die . . ."

The achievement of *unitas* and *concordia* are not abstract goals somehow separated from the life of the common person. *Unitas* is not a goal achievable only through correct theological affirmation. *Concordia* or agreement is not made possible simply by using the words which represent the broadest consensus. Both have

to do also with the human condition. Both are important and necessary precisely because the human and personal need is for the Gospel and the ministry of the Sacraments. All other theological ecclesiastical and personal agendas ought to be subservient to that.

SOME THESES FOR CONSIDERATION

Having offered some comments on what I see as the primary intention of the Confessors, let me propose for discussion several theses:

1. The Augsburg Confession has since June 23, 1530, embodied for all Lutherans their essential unity in matters fundamental to faith. The Confession is by itself a demonstration that agreement in the Gospel and the Sacraments is a sufficient basis for ecclesial fellowship.
2. The current lack of fellowship among all Lutherans in Canada is a reproach of the spirit of the Augsburg Confession, and suggests a failure to distinguish fundamental from non-fundamental matters in understanding the nature of the Church.
3. The Augsburg Confession should itself be for Lutherans in Canada a sufficient basis for fellowship.
4. In our continuing Lutheran discussions what is now of greatest importance is not *content* but *intent*; not doctrinal *substance* but doctrinal *usage*. We have in the Confessions sufficient content to permit concordia now to be expressed in unity.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FELLOWSHIP

"In keeping with the scope of its content, Art. VII of the Augsburg Confession should really have the title 'on the True Unity of the Church', according to Ernst Kinder.³ Given the historical circumstances in which A.C. VII was written, there seems no doubt that Kinder's assertion is correct. The principal concern is not to give a definition of the nature of the church. Rather there is an assumption of its real existence and the intention of making clear what is the basis of the churches' unity. What is fundamental to unity are the "doctrine of the Gospel" and the "administration of the Sacraments". "Human traditions", i.e., rites, ceremonies "instituted by men" are incidental, not fundamental. Unity at the level of Gospel and Sacrament is a profound unity which is expressive of Christ Himself as Head of the Church. Unity at this level cannot be destroyed nor denied by human custom and tradition. It is a unity present even when not acknowledged by ecclesiastical formulations and agreements. The unity is in Christ Himself. The pragmatic expression of that unity in the day to day life of churches can of course be frustrated. It is clear, however, that the Confessors saw their fundamental unity with the historic church even though they were ecclesiastically barred from expression of it in daily life. The fact that Lutheran states were then allowing priests to marry, modifying the mass, administering the Sacrament in both kinds, and challenging a centuries-old understanding of the nature of the Church's authority did not, in their minds, affect the basic unity of the Church founded in the Gospel. Fellowship is brought about by

3. Ernst Kinder, "Basic Considerations with Reference to Article VIII of the Augsburg Confession," *The Unity of the Church* (Rock Island: Augustana Press, 1957), p.59.

Christ Himself, it is in Christ Himself, it is expressed in Word and Sacrament alone. "In this constitutive sense, Word and Sacrament alone are the *notae ecclesiae*."⁴

An important point to be observed here is that the unity of the Church is a personal and dynamic unit in *Christ*. Historically, our discussion focused on unity as an abstraction, i.e., agreement on a set of doctrinal statements. The assumption has been made that the ecclesiastical expression of unity must await the kind of formulation to which everyone can agree. This is putting the cart before the horse. A.C. VII clearly states our unity is in the Gospel and Sacraments. The true unity is in Christ Himself as He comes to us in Word and Sacrament. The question is then not 'can we find unity', for we already have it, it is rather 'how shall we express the unity which is already there?'

The "*satis est*" of A.C. VII is of greatest importance in appreciating the intention of this article. It emphasizes that the central concern of the Reformation, namely the recovery of the Gospel of justification by God's grace alone, is all that is needed to express the Church's basic reality. It further emphasizes that all other matters are subject to this one central concern. Luther, in the midst of his most grievous disputes with Roman theologians, continued to maintain that the Roman Church was still truly the Church. "This is true: that the papacy has God's word and the office of the apostles, and that we have received Holy Scripture, Baptism, the Sacrament from them . . . I believe and am sure the Christian Church has remained even in the papacy" (L.W. vol. 24, p.304). It was never the intention of the Reformation Church to leave the Roman Church. Luther, in fact, to the end of his days, hoped for the kind of open ecumenical council which could permit the visible expression of union which he believed existed. There is explicit in Art. VII and implicit in the historic nature of Lutheranism a confession of the continuity and unity of the Church. Basic to this article is the conviction that that which constitutes the Church's existence is all that is necessary for its unity (*satis est*). The Augsburg Confession attempts consistently to point out what Lutherans and Romans had in common as an expression of the will for unity. There is consequently: " . . . a sort of contradiction between what the Lutheran Churches have become in the course of history and what was the basic intention of the Lutheran Reformation."⁵

The fact that Lutheran churches have existed as separate entities in the same nation, in some cases for over 400 years, is clearly a development other than that envisioned by the signatories of the Augsburg Confession.

The force of the "*satis est*" in A.C. VII requires us to examine seriously our own situation in the light of what constitutes "*veram unitatem*". The "*veram*" indicates there can be a false unity. As has already been pointed out, the Confession sees "true" unity as one in Christ, in the Gospel. An obvious implication of this is that not *more* than this can be required for unity to be expressed. That would be a false unity inasmuch as it would imply that more than unity in Gospel and Sacrament is required. Years ago Lutherans in Canada came to common agreement on what the Gospel is.⁶

There are obvious differences among us with regard to polity, particularly regard-

4. Ibid, p.6.

5. Harding Meyer, "Lutheranism in the Ecumenical Movement" *The Lutheran Church, Past and Present*, Vilmos Vajta, editor (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1977).

6. *Affirmation and Appeal* (Winnipeg: Joint Commission on Inter-Lutheran Relationships, 1970).

ing the nature of ministry, the role of the laity and the role of women in the Church. Since "Holy Orders" is not regarded as a sacrament among Lutherans, it seems quite inconsistent with our theology of the Church that either polity differences on the nature of ministry and church, or which sex should be eligible for ministry or what polity we hold on ministry, should disturb the visible expression of our unity which ought to be consequent on our confession. The "satis est" allocates to Gospel and Sacrament definitive importance in determining the basis for fellowship and unity.

This is not to say organic union is *necessarily required*. It is to say, however, that fellowship on the basis of the Gospel is already present and should not be denied on the basis of different forms of constitution, piety, administrative practices or methods of theological interpretation. The "satis est" also clearly sounds the ecumenical note. Based on the fact that the Augsburg Confession represented the "Confession" and "clear testimony" of Lutherans, it is evident the original signers were calling for the widest possible circle of ecclesial fellowship.

A question we must now ask is, 'do we take seriously the intention of the Augsburg Confession as long as we remain in a fragmented form ourselves?' Can we in our present situation with full legitimacy affirm A.C. VII's commitment to church unity? "The Reformation Confession of the continuity and unity of the Church and the awareness of having a responsibility for Christendom as a whole makes it binding on the Lutheran Church to seek dialogue and fellowship with other churches. Active ecumenical commitment is therefore an expression of fidelity to their Reformation origins."⁷

The ecumenical responsibility is especially clear now that both the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches are opening themselves to serious dialogue with us. It would be unfortunate indeed if the clear intention of A.C. VII were to be continually frustrated by internecine arguments incidental to rather than constitutive of ecclesial unity in fellowship. "Only those things have been recounted whereof we thought it was necessary to speak, in order that it might be understood that in doctrine and ceremonies nothing has been received on our part against Scripture and the Church Catholic." This accords with the intention expressed in the preface that the Lutherans would not ". . . hold back from anything that could bring about Christian concord."

The Confession is by its nature an attempt to bring about concord within Christendom and is a confession of such concord among Lutherans. In spite of this obvious fact, intrinsic to the Augsburg Confession, historically Lutheranism has consistently qualified this expression of unity. The history of Lutheranism in North America is virtually a study in varieties of such qualifications.

Within Canadian Lutheranism the Augsburg Confession's affirmation of what is necessary for unity has been achieved on more than one occasion and yet we still have not even realized full ecclesial communion among us, let alone organic unity, or ecumenical fellowship. As previously indicated, in 1970 the then members of the Joint Commission on Inter-Lutheran Relationships issued a collection of statements under the general title "Affirmation and Appeal". It was the conclusion of those commissioners that there then existed ". . . a consensus on the basis of which altar and pulpit fellowship could be declared and practised."

Do we, indeed, can we, say anything more?

7. Meyer, p. 23.